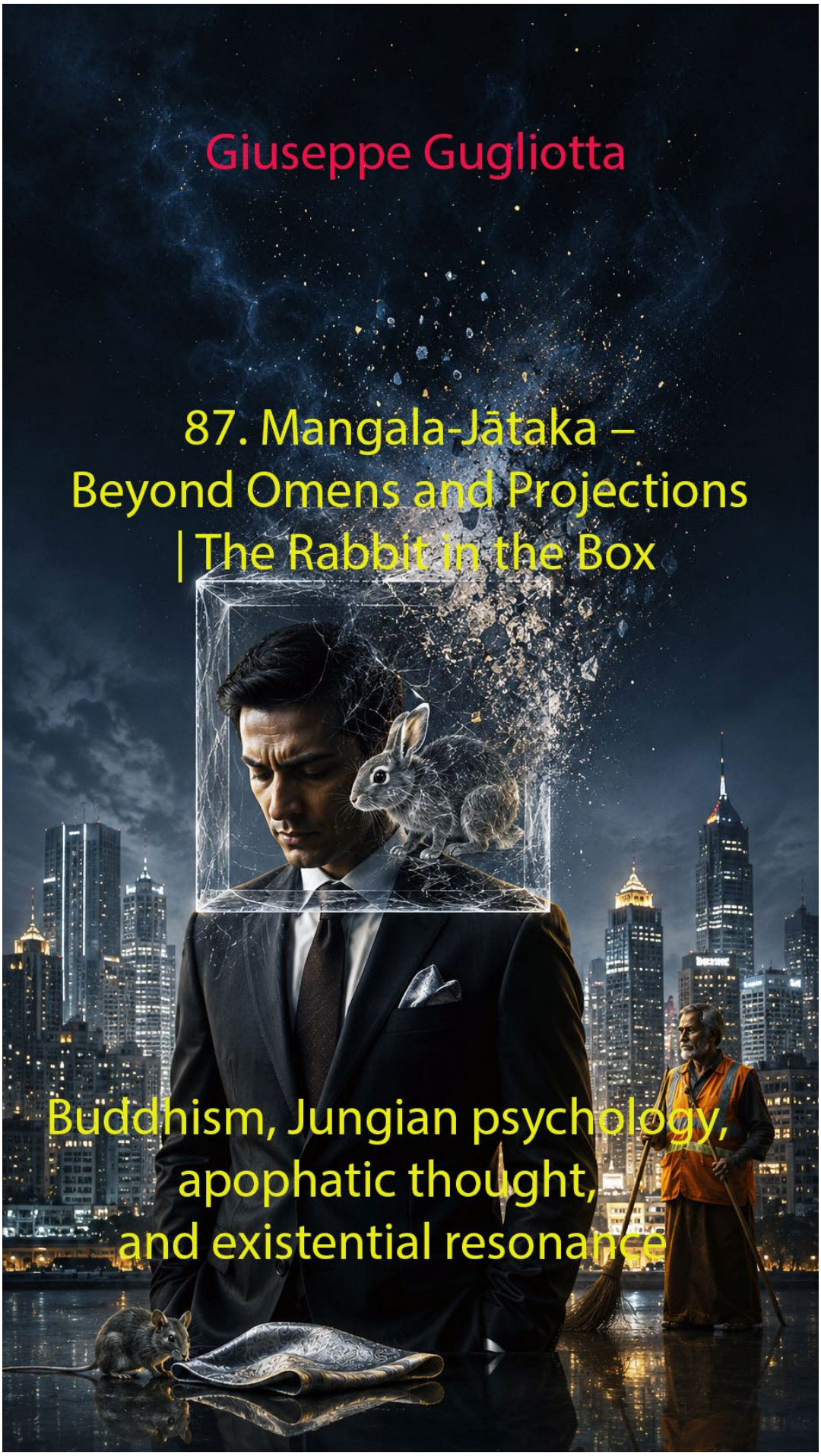
Giuseppe Gugliotta

87. Mangala-Jātaka – Beyond Omens and Projections | The Rabbit in the Box



Buddhism, Jungian psychology, apophatic thought, and existential resonance

87. MAṀGALA-JĀTAKA

A man is busy interpreting omens, instead of looking at the real causes of events.

The folly of superstitious faith in omens and the like.

"Who renounces." --This story was told by the Master while he was in the bamboo grove on a Brahmin skilled in the predictions that can be made from pieces of cloth. Tradition has it that a superstitious Brahmin with false opinions lived in Rājagaha, not believing in the Three Gems. This Brahmin was very rich; and a female mouse gnawed on one of her dresses, which lay in a trunk. One day, after bathing, he asked for this costume, and was told of the damage the mouse had done. 'If these clothes stay in the house,' he thought to himself, 'they will bring bad luck; Such a bad omen will surely bring a curse. It is out of the question to give them to any of my sons or servants; Because they will bring bad luck to anyone who has them. I have to get them thrown away in a field of bush; But how? I cannot hand them over to the servants; for they could desire and keep them, until the ruin of my house. My son has to take them." So he called his son, and, telling him the whole story, ordered him to take his load on a stick, without touching the clothes with his hand, and to throw them away in a bush. Then the son had to wash everything and then come back. That morning at dawn, the Master, looking around to see which people could be led to the truth, realized that father and son were predestined to attain salvation. So he took the remains of a hunter while he was hunting, towards the cemetery, and sat down at the entrance, giving off the six-colored rays that mark a Buddha. Soon it came to the point of the young Brahmin, who carefully carried his clothes as his father had ordered him, to the end of his staff, just as if he had a house snake to carry.

"What are you doing, young Brahmin?" asked the Master.

'My good Gotama,' was the answer, 'this dress, gnawed by mice, is like misfortune personified, it is as deadly as if it were soaked in poison; therefore my father, fearing that a servant might desire and keep the clothes, sent me. I promised that I would throw them away and then I would wash; And this is precisely the commission that brought me here." "Throw away the costume, then," said the Master; and the young Brahmin did so. "They fit me," said the Master, as he gathered up the clothes laden with destiny before the young man's eyes, despite sincere warnings and repeated pleas not to take them; and headed for the bamboo grove.

The young Brahmin hurried home to tell his father how the sage Gotama had declared that these clothes would fit him perfectly, and had insisted, in spite of all warnings to the contrary, to take the suit away from the bamboo grove. 'Those clothes,' thought the Brahmin to himself, 'are enchanted and accursed. Even the wise Gotama cannot wear them without destruction befalling him; And this would have discredited me. I will give the Wise One plenty of other clothes and make him throw away that suit." So, with a large number of clothes, he set out in company with his son for the bamboo grove. When he met the Master he respectfully stood to one side and said thus: "Is it really true, from what I have heard, that you, my good Gotama, have taken a garment in the field of the cimise?" "That's right, Brahmin." "My good Gotama, that costume is cursed; If you use them, they will destroy you. If you need clothes, take these and throw away that suit." "Brahmin," replied the Master, "I have renounced the world by open profession, and I am content with the rags that lie by the road or in bathing places, or that are thrown into heaps of rubbish or cimises. While you have preserved your superstitions in former times, as well as in the present." Having said that, at the request of the Brahmin, he told this story of the past.

Once upon a time there reigned in the city of Rājagaha, in the kingdom of Magadha, a righteous king of Magadha. In those years the Bodhisatta came back to life as a Brahmin of the Northwest. Growing up, he renounced the world for the life of a hermit, obtained Knowledge and Achievements, and went to live in the Himalayas. On one occasion, returning from the Himalayas and settling down at the King's pleasure, on the second day he went to the city to collect alms. Seeing him, the king summoned him to the palace, and there he was provided with a place and food, asking him for the promise that he would take up his abode in pleasure. So the Bodhisatta received his food at the palace and lived in the gardens.

In those days there lived in that city a Brahmin known as the Omen of Canvas. And he had in a trunk a suit gnawed by rats, and everything happened just as in the previous story. But when the son was going towards

the field of bones, the Bodhisatta arrived first and took his place at the gate; and, picking up the suit which the young Brahmin had thrown away, he returned to pleasure. When the son told this to the old Brahmin, the latter exclaimed: "It will be the death of the king's ascetic"; and he begged the Bodhisatta to throw away that garment, so as not to lose it. But the ascetic replied: "The rags that are thrown away in the stalls are enough for us. We do not believe in superstitions about luck, which are not approved by Buddhas, Pacceka Buddhas, or Bodhisattas; and therefore no wise man should believe in fortune." Hearing the truth thus expressed, the Brahmin abandoned his errors and took refuge in the Bodhisatta. And the Bodhisatta, by keeping his intuition intact, attained rebirth later in the Brahma Kingdom.

Having told this story, the Master, as Buddha, taught the Truth to the Brahmin in this stanza:

Who renounces omens, dreams and signs,

That man, freed from the errors of superstition,

They will triumph over paired Depravities

And on all ties at the end of time.

When the Master thus preached his doctrine to the Brahmin in the form of this stanza, he went on to preach the Four Truths, at the end of which that Brahmin, together with his son, attained the First Way. The Master identified the Birth by saying, "The father and son of today were also the father and son of those days, and I myself the ascetic."

The Rabbit in the Box

I. The Man Who Didn't Believe Omens

Arun often said that he did not believe in superstition. He was one of Mumbai's most sought-after business lawyers. His every day was organized with mathematical precision. Charts predicted market swings, algorithms simulated scenarios, contracts tried to close any possible unforeseen event.

Even his appearance seemed to participate in the same architecture of control: midnight blue jacket sewn on Savile Row, white shirt, shoes polished to reflect the sky of the glass towers.

Everything appeared perfectly orderly.

Only his mind was not. There was a subtle fracture, invisible to others, where intelligence slowly gave way to the need for certainty. The more external control grew, the more the interior demanded signs to be interpreted.

It was not yet superstition. It was something more refined. It was the belief that the universe had to continually send him confirmations.

II. The mouse bite

The night before the most important merger of his career, Arun entered the mansion's storage. A mouse had gnawed on the hem of the silk handkerchief he had kept for years. It had been the last gift from his grandfather. Nothing more. Nothing less.

For a few moments he looked at that small broken thread. Then something happened. Not in the handkerchief. In his mind. The damage ceased to be a simple damage. It became a message. The mouse was no longer an animal. It was an omen.

Like the Brahmin of the Maṅgala-Jātaka, Arun no longer saw natural causes. He saw only a secret language of fate. The agreement would have failed. The house had been contaminated. Misfortune had already chosen its target. Fear had turned a shard of silk into an oracle.

III. The Rite of Fear

Arun didn't dare to touch the handkerchief. He called the young assistant, Vihaan. In a tense voice he gave meticulous instructions.

"Take a pair of pliers."

"Don't touch it."

"Put it in an envelope."

"Seal it."

"Use a stick."

"Take it directly to the industrial garbage disposal."

Every gesture was studied with the accuracy of a health procedure. Vihaan obeyed.

As he walked through the service corridors, he held the very light piece of cloth as if he were carrying a deadly substance. Neither of them realized that the ritual did not serve to eliminate fear. He was celebrating it. Every precaution added reality to a danger that had never existed.

IV. The Man Who Collected Paper

Near the unloading pier, an elderly garbage collector was separating cartons and newspapers destined for recycling. The orange jacket was worn out. Not the eyes. When he saw the young man advancing with his cane, he smiled slightly.

"What are you carrying?"

Vihaan told everything. The mouse. The omen. The curse. The old man listened without interrupting him. Then he took the envelope with his bare hands. He slowly opened the zipper. He pulled out his handkerchief. She looked at him against the light.

"Beautiful silk."

He found a small needle in his work bag. With a few stitches he sewed up the gnawed edge. Then he carefully folded it and knotted it around his neck. Not as a challenge. Not as a demonstration. Simply because it was a beautiful handkerchief.

Sometimes awakening does not disprove the illusion. He simply stops participating in it.

V. The Box

From the tenth floor, Arun saw the scene. His blood froze. Racing. He passed through lobbies, elevators, and corridors. When he reached the pier he shouted:

"Take it off immediately! It's dangerous!"

The garbage collector looked at him. There was no irony in his gaze. There was no superiority. There was only one space that seemed to have no need to believe or deny.

"Dangerous?"

He asked gently.

"It's just silk."

Those three words produced a crack. Arun instinctively turned to the dark window of a van. He saw his own reflection. The jacket was still impeccable. But the face was gone. In its place appeared a geometric box, drawn as if with white chalk on the black background of the night. Inside the box something was stirring. A rabbit. Small. The huge eyes. Shortness of breath. The contracted body. He didn't try to get out. He just kept bumping into the invisible walls.

Jung would have called that animal an autonomous complex.

The Buddha would simply smile.

Both would have recognized that prison was not the world. It was the identification with what the mind had built.

VI. Open the box

The garbage collector explained nothing. He offered no doctrines. He didn't talk about karma. He didn't talk about psychology. He only said:

"Look closely."

Arun stood still. For the first time he did not look at the handkerchief. He observed the mechanism that had transformed a piece of cloth into a destiny. He saw the thought born. He saw fear take possession of it. He saw the symbol become a prison. And he saw that all this was happening without the handkerchief ever doing anything.

With a trembling hand he slowly took the silk from the garbage collector's neck. He bent it. He slipped it into his jacket pocket. Directly against the chest. No lightning. No curse. No signs. In the reflection the rabbit stopped bumping against the walls. He had not been freed by someone. It was the box that had disappeared.

VII. Beyond the signs

The company merger was completed without incident. But that was not the decisive event. The real transformation had taken place much earlier, in front of the window of an old van. That evening Arun looked at himself in the bathroom mirror. He saw only one man. Elegant. Tired. I live. The handkerchief was still in the pocket of his jacket. He was back to being what he had always been.

A piece of silk. Nor lucky. Nor cursed. For a moment he understood that omens do not inhabit objects. They inhabit the gaze that interprets them. And when that gaze is silent, the world does not lose meaning. He only loses the chains we had imposed on him.

Silence offered him no answer. But there was no longer any question that demanded an omen. Somewhere beyond the lighted windows of the city, a rat kept gnawing on what it found. And the world simply continued to be.

The cover: a prison that cannot be seen

The image introduces the heart of the entire story even before a single word is spoken.

At the center we find Arun, an elegant, powerful man, apparently master of his own life. It is immersed in the contemporary metropolis of Mumbai, in the world of glass towers, business and economic rationality.

But behind his figure there is something that belongs to another level of reality.

A box.

And inside the box, a rabbit.

The rabbit is not a real animal. It is the image of fear.

The box is not a physical prison. It is the mental structure through which Arun tries to protect himself from uncertainty.

This is the first key to the image: the prison is not found in the world that surrounds man, but in the gaze with which he interprets that world.

The most important detail, however, is perhaps the least obvious.

The box is transparent. Arun could get out of it. But he doesn't know that he exists yet.

From Maṅgala-Jātaka to contemporary Mumbai

The 87. Maṅgala-Jātaka tells of a seemingly simple situation: a man struggles to interpret omens and signs, attributing to events a power that they do not possess.

The story contains a surprisingly modern critique.

Human beings do not easily tolerate uncertainty. When he does not know the causes of what happens, he tends to construct meanings. A random event becomes a sign. A coincidence becomes a message. A detail becomes a warning. The unknown is transformed into a story that at least seems understandable. The problem is not only that the story can be false. The deeper problem is that the mind ends up believing its own interpretation more than reality itself.

The handkerchief and the mouse

Arun is a successful business lawyer. His life seems to be built on the ability to foresee. Contracts, clauses, markets, risks, scenarios. Everything has to be calculated. Everything must be foreseen. Everything must be able to be controlled. Then, the night before the most important deal of his career, a mouse gnaws on the edge of an old silk handkerchief.

The event is trivial. But something decisive happens in Arun's mind. The mouse is no longer a mouse. The handkerchief is no longer a handkerchief. Damage is no longer damage.

Everything becomes an omen.

It is here that the contemporary tale directly encounters the Jātaka. Superstition does not necessarily arise from an ignorant mind. It can also arise from an extremely intelligent mind when intelligence is used to defend against uncertainty.

Arun does not stop being rational. Become rational in the service of fear.

The ritual of fear

Arun orders his assistant not to touch the handkerchief. It must be taken with pliers. Closed in an envelope. Carried on a stick. Eliminated.

The scene may seem paradoxical. Yet it contains a very real psychological mechanism. The more we fight something that we imagine to be dangerous, the more we confirm to ourselves that that danger exists.

Ritual does not eliminate superstition. It makes it concrete. Fear has created a liturgy. And the liturgy makes fear even more credible. It is one of the central passages of the story: illusion no longer remains just a thought. Begin to organize behavior.

The garbage collector and simplicity

Then the most important character in the story appears. He is not a guru. He is not a priest. He is not a psychologist. He is an elderly garbage collector. He is wearing a simple orange vest and is collecting paper.

When he sees the handkerchief, he doesn't see a curse. He sees silk. He stitches it up. He wears it. And he quietly continues his work.

Its narrative strength lies precisely in simplicity. It does not fight illusion. He doesn't try to prove Arun wrong. It does not build a new theory. He simply stops participating in the omen game.

In this sense, his presence profoundly recalls the figure of the Bodhisatta in the Jātakas: wisdom does not necessarily have to proclaim itself as wisdom.

Sometimes it manifests itself in the most ordinary way possible.

The reflection: when fear becomes visible

The decisive moment takes place in front of the dark window of a van. Arun sees his own reflection. But his face has disappeared. In its place there is a box. And inside the box there is a terrified rabbit.

The rabbit represents what Arun had never wanted to see directly: his own fear. As long as it was projected onto the world, the world seemed dangerous. Now, for the first time, danger appears within him. The screening has withdrawn. The Shadow has become visible.

Jungian reading: the complex in the box

From a Jungian perspective, the rabbit can be read as the symbolic representation of an autonomous complex.

A psychic core charged with emotional energy can condition perception without the Ego being fully aware of it.

Arun believes he is reacting to reality. In reality, it is reacting to its own representation of reality. The handkerchief becomes the container of fear. The mouse becomes the messenger of fear. The future becomes the space in which fear projects its consequences. The whole world is reinterpreted by the complex.

The box therefore represents a particular form of identification: the Ego believes it is a prisoner of the world, while it is a prisoner of its own interpretation of the world.

The solution is not to destroy the rabbit. Arun must see the rabbit. He must recognize it. And then he has to open the box.

Buddhist reading: the sign that does not contain destiny

Here the story returns to the heart of the Maṅgala-Jātaka.

An event can happen without containing a message intended for us. The mouse gnaws on silk. This is the fact.

"Everything will go wrong."

This is the interpretation.

There is a space between the two. It is precisely in that space that freedom is born. The Buddhist perspective does not require replacing a negative omen with a positive omen.

It doesn't say:

"That's a bad sign."

but neither:

"That's a good sign."

Rather, it invites us to see the process by which the mind attaches meaning. When the attachment to interpretation weakens, the fact becomes only the fact again. The mouse becomes a mouse again. Silk becomes silk again. The future is once again unknown. And uncertainty, which previously seemed like a threat, can become space.

The apophatic dimension: when the world is silent

Here perhaps the deepest dimension of the story emerges. Arun's liberation does not consist in the discovery of a truer meaning. It does not replace a superstition with a philosophy. He does not discover the "true message" of the handkerchief. He discovers something more radical:

The handkerchief had no message.

The world doesn't have to talk to us. A sunset can simply be a sunset. A meeting can simply be a meeting. A coincidence can simply be a coincidence. Silence is not poverty of meaning. It is freedom from the need to possess meaning.

In this perspective, the apophatic dimension does not add a new answer. It progressively removes the answers that we had superimposed on reality.

Open the box

Arun's decisive gesture is simple. He takes the handkerchief again. He puts it in his jacket pocket. In contact with the skin. No lightning. No misfortune. No spectacular revelations. The world does not change.

Arun's relationship with the world changes.

In the reflex, the rabbit stops shaking. The box begins to dissolve. Not because someone killed the rabbit. But because it is no longer necessary to keep him prisoner.

This is perhaps the most important symbol of the entire story.

Healing is not about destroying what we fear. It consists in no longer having to build a prison around what we fear.

The video: from narration to resonance

https://youtu.be/RsBBE-Xhv4w

The narrative proceeds through eight visual moments.

From the confidence of the successful man we move on to the appearance of the mouse; from the mouse comes the omen; from the omen the ritual is born; From the ritual we arrive at the meeting with the garbage collector.

Then the narrative enters the symbolic space. The box appears. The rabbit appears.

And what had been projected onto the world until then is finally recognized as an inner movement.

In the last images, the box dissolves. The rabbit also disappears. Not because it has been defeated, but because it is no longer necessary to represent it.

The image itself becomes emptier. The landscape opens up. The city remains, but loses its function as a scene of fear. The silence increases. It is a deliberate choice: the conclusion must not explain the awakening; it must leave room for its possible emergence.

From superstition to awareness

Arun's path can be read as a small map of the mind:

Event → interpretation → fear → ritual → projection → recognition → integration → silence.

The decisive passage is between event and interpretation. It is there that we often build our world. We cannot prevent unexpected events from happening. But we can learn to observe the moment when the mind begins to tell us what those events "mean."

This attention does not eliminate uncertainty. It makes it habitable.

The rabbit was not in the silk

In the end, Arun returns home. The handkerchief is still in his pocket. Silk has not changed. The world has not changed. Yet something is profoundly different.

Perhaps this is the true lesson of the Maṅgala-Jātaka.

We don't necessarily have to learn how to interpret the signs better. Perhaps we must learn to live even when there are no signs. The rabbit was not in silk. It wasn't in the mouse. It wasn't in the future. It was in the box. And the box was built out of fear. When the box disappears, no new certainty appears.

Something more fragile and vaster appears:

the possibility of letting things be what they are.

Final resonance

Perhaps awakening does not consist in finally understanding what the world wants to tell us. Maybe it starts when the world stops having to tell us something.

A mouse can only be a mouse. A silk can only be silk. A night can only be a night. And the future can remain open. Not as a threat. Not as a promise. Simply open.

And it is perhaps precisely in this space without omens that the rabbit, finally, discovers that he has never really been a prisoner.

Epilogue

Unlike the Kimpakka Jātaka, in which the symbolic center was the seductive illusion of the object, here the center is the interpretative illusion of the subject. It is not the world that deceives; it is the mind that, unable to pause in uncertainty, transforms events into omens. For this reason, in the epilogue, the four perspectives progressively converge in silence.

Buddhist Reading

Beyond the omens

The Maṅgala-Jātaka unmasks one of the oldest illusions of the human mind: the belief that destiny is announced through favorable or unfavorable signs. The Brahmin of the story interprets every event as a hidden message, until he becomes a slave to his own interpretations. The Bodhisatta, on the other hand, does not fight superstition with sophisticated arguments; it simply lives without attributing to objects a power that they do not possess.

Arun also walks this same path. A mouse gnaws on a silk handkerchief. The event is real. The omen does not.

Between the fact and the fear there is an invisible act: interpretation. That's where suffering is born. The Buddha teaches that the phenomenal world is governed by causes and conditions (paṭiccasamuppāda), not by omens. When the mind stops constructing imaginary meanings, reality becomes simple again: a mouse is a mouse, silk is silk, and the future is contained in neither.

Freedom does not consist in finding favorable signs, but in no longer needing to look for them.

Jungian reading

The rabbit in the box

Jung would probably have recognized in the rabbit locked in the box the image of an autonomous complex. A small psychic core fed by fear separates from consciousness and begins to live a life of its own. Each new event is immediately captured by the complex and reinterpreted according to its logic.

The mouse is no longer of interest. The handkerchief is no longer of interest. The financial agreement is no longer of interest. Everything is absorbed by a single emotional center: fear.

The box represents the identification of the ego with its complex. As long as man believes that the problem is outside, he will continue to fight objects, people and circumstances. But when he sees the rabbit in the reflection he understands that the prison is not the world: it is the mental image in which he himself has locked himself.

Supplementation is not about eliminating the rabbit. It consists of opening the box. Only then does the symbol cease to dominate consciousness and return to being what it has always been: an image.

Apophatic dimension

When the world stops talking

The mind is constantly desiring to interpret. Every encounter becomes a sign. Every coincidence is a revelation. Every unexpected event a message.

The apophatic way suggests a radically different direction. Maybe the world isn't trying to tell us anything. Perhaps it is our fear that cannot stand silence. When interpretations cease, no better explanation appears. Something infinitely simpler appears. Things return to being themselves.

The handkerchief does not promise luck. The mouse does not announce disasters. The sky does not send messages. Reality does not lose depth. It only loses the words we had projected onto it.

Silence is not the absence of meaning. It is the place where meaning no longer needs to be possessed.

Existential resonance

The world without boxes

Perhaps everyone keeps, without realizing it, a small rabbit in their mind. We are constantly changing its name.

Anxiety.

Control.

Destiny.

Bad luck.

Need for certainty.

But the name changes little. Every time we build a different box. Then we start to see that box everywhere.

In the faces.

In meetings.

In dreams.

In the markets.

In the future.

In the past.

The account suggests that liberation does not happen when we finally find the right omen. It happens when we understand that the rabbit has never lived inside the handkerchief. It's always been inside the box. And the box has always been built out of our fear.

When that construction dissolves, the world no longer becomes safe. It becomes more real. And perhaps the awakening begins right there. The moment we can look at the sky, a handkerchief, a mouse or the face of a stranger without wondering what they mean. By simply letting them be. As they have always been.

This epilogue completes the story harmoniously with The Fruit of Perspective. If in the Kimpakka Jātaka the central theme was the projection of desire ("the poisoned apple is not what it appears"), in the Maṅgala-Jātaka the center becomes the projection of fear ("the omen is not in the object, but in the gaze"). Together they constitute the first two stages of Level I – The pitfalls of appearance: first we learn not to believe in the seductions of the world; then we learn not to believe the interpretations of our mind. This progression naturally prepares the third Jātaka of the level, in which the illusion will no longer concern either the object or the omen, but the very way in which we construct identity.